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Teachers as Advocates for Student: Why Some Choose to Go the Extra Mile

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Teachers as Advocates for Student:
Why Some Choose to Go the Extra Mile

Linda Cohen

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Education

AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

2005

MASTERS OF ARTS IN EDUCATION
AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Action Research Final Project of

Linda Cohen


has been approved by the Review Committee and fulfills the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Education degree.

Date of Symposium _____

Date Completed: August 3, 2005

Committee:


Advisor


Reader

Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the teachers who go the extra mile to teach with heart and passion. And to the students who share their lives with us and often teach us more than we teach them.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all the participants of the study for their honesty, forthrightness, and openness. I appreciate the time they took time from their busy schedules to share their perspectives and thoughts.

I would like to thank *Vicki Olson* for her time and insights as my reader. She was one of my first instructors at Augsburg College and I find it fitting that she should be part of my final project as I complete the masters program.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers as Advocates for Students:
Why Some Choose to Go the Extra Mile

Linda Cohen

August 3, 2005

☐ Leadership Application Project (EDC 585)☒ Action Research (EDC 587) Final Project

Teachers have the opportunity to become leaders who shape, alter and foster their students' social and academic life. The student population of late has emerged as diverse in culture, needs and learning ability. It has become increasingly more important for a teacher to understand the student as "a whole," since it often pertains to the student's learning capability and growth as a person. Identifying the factors that encourage student advocacy could be a huge step in continuing progress or a positive change toward establishing advocacy environments.

This qualitative action research study investigates the factors that formulate a teacher as an advocate for a student or the lack of certain factors that can hinder the process. If we understand "why" our teachers make the choices they do, then perhaps we can channel our efforts and energies into supportive programs to foster leadership or help remove the hindrances that prevent it.

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Teachers as Advocates for Students: Why Some Choose to Go the Extra Mile

Introduction

Teachers have the opportunity to become leaders who can shape, alter and foster their students' social and academic lives. Research has shown that adolescents who perceive teachers as caring, and creating well-structured and safe learning environments are more likely to be engaged in school and be more successful academically and socially (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Research has also shown that adolescents who have teacher-student relationships benefit the students' social, behavioral, emotional and academic health (Murray, 2002). Furthermore, research has maintained that in addition to improving academics, relationship building is the best defense against violence and bullying in the schools (Peters, 2004).

This research investigates three areas involving the participant teachers: (1) the teacher's background and characteristics, (2) the teacher's philosophies, and (3) the decision making process in the teacher's school. The participants in the interviews discuss and help define the term of *advocate* from their perspective. The nature of qualitative action research is that questions unfold and lead to further inquiry based on the responses of the participants.

Identifying the factors that encourage student advocacy could be a huge step in continuing progress or a positive change toward establishing advocacy environments. If we understand "why" our teachers make the choices they do, then perhaps we can channel our efforts and energies into supportive programs to foster leadership or help remove the hindrances that prevent it.

The student population of late has emerged as diverse in culture and learning ability. It has become increasingly more important for a teacher to understand a student's background and current social economic status as it often pertains to the student's learning capability and growth as a person. Teachers as leaders provide a model for collaboration and transformation in the schools for caring communities of learners and future responsible adults.

Literature Review

Research related to factors that motivate some teachers to embrace the role of a leader or student advocate and the factors that hinder or restrict a teacher from that choice are rare. This literature review includes a summary and critical analysis of empirically based articles published between December of 1990 and September of 2004, that examines the relationships and affects on a student when a supportive teacher relationship is involved. This review is divided into three sections that address student engagement and connection, student alienation, and interventions.

Student Engagement and Connection

Students who perceive teachers as caring, creating well-structured environments where expectations are high, clear, and fair, are more likely to be engaged in school (Klem & Connell, 2004). The study supports the theory that teacher support is important for student engagement in school, which also produces higher attendance and test scores. Klem and Connell (2004), suggest that schools providing students and families with an in-school advocate also enhanced the students' success. Additionally, parent conference attendance rate increased.

Supportive and caring relationships within families promote academic motivation among adolescents and reduce health risk behavior (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Exploring the association between school connectedness and teacher support, McNeely and Falci (2004) found that on the average most students felt a

sense of belonging and that teachers care about them. The study found that caring, fair treatment, and engaging the student by the teacher can delay the initiation of health-risk behaviors.

It would follow that positive relationships with teachers would help foster the students' sense of well being and security which would promote individual social, emotional and academic competence.

Student Alienation

A major cause of students' low academic achievement, particularly among students of color is thought to be student alienation (Calabreses & Poe, 1990; Jordon, Lara & McPartland, 1996). Wayman (2002) studied student perceptions of teacher ethnic bias and compared such perceptions by school status, ethnicity and gender. Student perception of teacher ethnic bias was a component of student alienation. Wayman suggests that schools pay attention to students' perceptions and improve conditions that contribute to the problem, regardless of whether the bias actually exists or not.

Diamond, Randolh & Spillane (2004) compiled data regarding teachers' expectations and responsibility for learning correlated with race, class and organizational habits. The research emphasized that teachers and administrators need to be cognizant of how their beliefs and practices are influenced by the perceptions they have of students' race and social class. School leaders must create environments that are aware and respectful of students' race and culture.

Using student input and perspectives are key in understanding the high drop out rate and alienation from school a specific group feels. Their accounts suggest that the at-risk population want teachers who understand their perspective, know them, have discussions with them, care about them and treat them with respect (Pomeroy, 1999).

Teachers should provide the students with an opportunity to discuss their personal histories and cultures. Gaining insight into their students' backgrounds will allow for greater understanding and build respect based on the individualism of the students. Bringing the students' histories into the classroom will also relay the message to the students that who they are as a whole is important to the teacher and thereby strengthen their relationships.

Interventions

In building student and teacher relationships the element of students feeling safe in their environment and participating in classrooms built on respect underscores the importance of teachers intervening in bullying situations. Yoon (2004) suggests that teachers examine their perceptions, policies and school climate. Teachers' roles may be critical in respect to the intervention, such as empathy toward victims and strategies used in effective management of behaviors of bullies.

There is a need to provide preservice and inservice training for teachers that help guide them to choose positive interventions for the students. Teachers' behaviors affect students' motivational levels and academic success and since

interventions is a major part of classroom management they should be designed on the knowledge of the student (Alderman & Nix, 1997).

The research findings help establish the connection that supportive, and caring relationships with families contributed to promote academic motivation in the student.

Negative experiences at school and poor interactions with teachers are detrimental for the adjustment of the students and contribute to academic failure, peer rejection and social isolation. When teachers develop trust, based on open communication, and maintain supportive and respectful relationships with the students it helps the students build positive self-images, which enhances their ability to be successful in school.

Summary

Studies show that students who have a sense of belonging, a voice with open communication, are treated fairly, and feel safe, will become more connected with schools, and feel less alienated. Understanding the dimensions that enhance the student should help establish qualities needed for teachers to become effective advocates for students.

Methods

This research proposes through qualitative action research (Mills, 2003), to investigate the factors that motivate some teachers to play a role of an advocate for a student, and the factors that hinder or restrict a teacher from choosing that role.

A characteristic of inductive reasoning is to begin with an observation, observe a sample, study patterns, develop concepts regarding the patterns and then draw conclusions from the population from which the sample represents (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). While traditional qualitative research reports and draws conclusions, action research also provides suggestions of action and positive changes that may occur based on the analysis of the data (Mills, 2003).

In this study, I seek a better understanding of the complexity teachers face in being advocates for students. So qualitative action research conducted exclusively with in-depth interviews with educators, observations, audio recordings, field notes and analytical memos provide the researcher with a method to gather data and allow for the study of themes that emerged from the data (Mills, 2003).

As a substitute teacher, I had an opportunity to work at over 25 different schools in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, thereby providing a network in which to draw participants for this study. Participants from the field of special education and regular education were selected from four different schools.

I verbally recruited the participants through personal contact. There were five participants chosen based on my observations and initial discussions. The participants were chosen that modeled the six principles that Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace (1996) outlines in *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us?* Six principles that are of central importance to positive conditions of learning: respect for students, fairness to all students, autonomy, intellectual challenge, social support and security.

Interviews with the participants consisted of one or two open ended interviews ranging in length from one to two hours over a period of three months. All participants signed a consent form and the Institutional Review Board guidelines were adhered to during the process. Four of the five interviews were tape recorded with the participants' written permission. Background notes were taken before the interviews, field notes were written immediately after the interviews and the researcher transcribed the four interviews. One participant was not taped during the interview and the process was completed from observation and with interview notes, along with field notes.

Some preliminary questions regarding each participant's decision to become an educator, life experience, length of career, philosophies of roles in the classroom, and the decision-making process in the participant's school were asked during the interviews. A discussion evolved regarding participants' perspectives of advocacy.

Participants

The participants represented different positions and fields of education. The five participants were an elementary school principal, an elementary special education teacher, an educational paraprofessional studying to become a teacher, a retired middle school regular education teacher and an associate professor college librarian. I had personally interacted with two of the participants in work situations and they were strong candidates because of their favorable interaction with children, based on the principals described by Rudduck et al (1996). The other three participants presented an interest in being interviewed upon hearing the topic of the research. They also conveyed qualities of the principles described by Rudduck et al. (1996) during the pre-interview discussions.

Barb

An elementary school principal who has had a well-rounded background in education. She started her career in regular education, moved to special education and had since become an administrator. She presently is a principal in an evolving urban school that has had a high influx of children in poverty, as defined by the amount of free and reduced lunches, in the past three years. She has initiated innovative projects such as obtaining grants for free pizza dinners to draw the parent community into school for social support and to interact with the staff and

each other. She has supported programs such as the *Critter Man* that bring the message of diversity and respect to the students.

Chris

An elementary special education teacher, hadn't planned on working in special education but chose it after her regular education license found her in a saturated field. She came to feel "that it is what fate is all about I guess. I belong here." I had personally witnessed her wisdom and commonsense approach in regard to her tireless efforts to find the best setting for children that will help them be successful in the school setting. Her voice has never been raised to the children and her respect is reflected in her common demeanor and her endless patience is displayed in the time she exerts in mediating disputes among children. She has been key in her school community in facilitating new curriculum to enhance intellectual challenges among the students and staff.

Nancy

A paraprofessional, was chosen because of her ability to offer a unique perspective working with a special needs high school student on a one-to-one basis and her ability to present a fresh view of a teacher just starting in the educational field. In pre-interview discussions she exhibited a passion for fairness and respect when speaking of the student whom she interacts with each day. Her anecdotes regarding the student reflect her encouragement toward the student to make good choices and become more independent. They also reflect her

continuing effort to find solutions that best serve that student made her a good candidate for the study.

Joe

A retired middle school teacher was chosen to give a perspective from the viewpoint of an educator who has been seasoned in the field and has since concluded his career in education. He taught as a substitute teacher for a year and then in an inner city junior high school for 11 years as a second career after he retired from the military. In the pre-interview discussion his comments reflected fondness and respect for his former students. Since he resides in the neighborhood that he taught in, a number of former students still stop him in public to say hello. He spoke of his pleasure of being involved outside the classroom and gave the example of the dances he chaperoned at the school as a faculty member.

Ben

The final participant, an associate professor and college librarian, was approached for participation after he had expressed strong interest in the topic during a conversation with me. It was clear from the pre-interview discussions that he had a high regard for students, often referring to their best interests, and his position as a librarian involved a strong element of teaching on a one-to-one basis, along with frequent interactions with students. He had actually voiced that he felt he was a strong advocate and that once he received tenure there was nothing stopping him in regard to putting the student first. His instructions to his staff regarding

students are that the staff was to be approachable and accessible to the student. His input will lend the perspective of advocacy at a college level.

Chosen for the richness and diversity of their backgrounds in education, the participants collectively provide a sampling of individual stories and perspectives from diverse varied fields in education. Two participants were male, and three were female. Two participants were under the age of thirty and three participants were over the age of fifty years old. All participants were Caucasian and one participant has earned a doctorate degree, three of the five participants have masters degrees, and one participant has earned a bachelors degree.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by an organizational review of the emerging data. Common themes were centrally identified that related to the topic in the participants' interviews, an example being identification of patterns, were established. Data was coded and categorized inductively using the general method of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to aid in the process. Themes were extracted and analyzed in terms of the questions and new questions were analyzed as they emerged.

The themes drawn from the data helped formulate questions, suggestions and conclusions to understand the factors that formulate a teacher as an advocate for the students or the lack of certain factors that can hinder the process.

Findings

Each participant's interview and data revealed unique perspectives, and an analysis of the data revealed six predominant themes in the interviews: background, characteristics, philosophies, unique problem-solving abilities, forming relationships and individual perspectives regarding why peers don't advocate.

Background

All of the five participants revealed that from an early age they had always wanted an educational vocation. Joe related that he “ wanted to be a teacher all [his] life,” but chose a military career first and returned to his dream after he retired from the military. Barb started as a teacher because she “...always wanted to be a teacher,” and later, though still in education, she changed her direction to educational administration. Chris grew up an only child and her mother was a teacher so she related that “my mother being a teacher I spent a lot of time, even in elementary school, working with teachers and that interested me.” She expressed that she therefore knew from childhood that she wanted to be a teacher. Ben stated that at 12 years old he had seen a very good librarian in action helping people and he knew that was what he wanted to do as an adult. Nancy's future in education began as a voice in high school.

I think it started when I really was in high school. Between being in athletics and being perceived as a role model on the team and like being one of the leaders that was always teaching the other kids how to do things and lifeguarding, teaching swimming lessons and being a leader at church. I started to form the idea that I liked to teach others and give them the knowledge and the skills that they need to help themselves further their education. In high school my science teacher made the subject come to life. He's the first teacher that really stressed that girls in particular can do just as much and achieve just as high as the males in our society. He stressed the importance of never selling yourself short, never giving up on your goals and everything was attainable. It just might not happen how we want it to....It will all come in a roundabout way and he stressed that things happen in the sequence that they happen.

Indeed her career did not happen just as she planned, for after high school she went on to college to major in biology and then work in the science field. After having been in the profession for a couple of years she recalled that voice within and went back to school to become a science teacher. In the process she also has been working as a paraprofessional with a high school student in special education.

All participants at some point in their lives' felt a pull toward the educational field. Also, each participant during childhood had been exposed to an

adult modeling the profession that they would eventually gravitate toward as an adult.

Characteristics

Passion was a common key element interwoven in all the participants' characters. Barb related that "you do it from the heart" and confided that she had a difficult time staying away from the school where she had done her internship and would often return during her lunch hour on her own time to help with the students. Joe's voice displayed strong passion when he related how his students had sought him out to talk about personal issues such as the divorce of a parent. He expressed that it made him feel good to be an ear for the students.

Chris had the self-awareness to realize that she was very passionate in her career while also trying to keep a balance with her family life.

I guess at this point in my career, teaching is my passion. I love to teach. Yeah, I could be a stay at home mom, you know we'd have a different house, a different vehicle, and stuff like that, which you know would be fine. But I like teaching and I think I'm good at it and you know if I can make the difference in the life of just one kid, you know REALLY make a difference. Then I've had a successful career.

Nancy remarked, “I really truly believe that we need more educators that wholeheartedly care...that are there for the students.” Ben having had the benefit of a long career was very much aware of his passion.

It is a passion and I don’t think I’d do anything differently. The money attached to being a librarian was not great but I didn’t ever go into the field because of the salaries. In the sixties we didn’t think of that.

Empathy and compassion were also common denominators throughout the interviews. Chris confided, “I’ve not personally been concerned with my safety. You know I’ve been very concerned about the safety of the kids.” Ben stated that he had seen compassion in his role models as a child, even to the extent that that compassion protected children from the ugly side of life. Joe showed strong compassion in his interview when he revealed how he hated child abuse and when he also emphasized that teachers *needed* to be mandated reporters.

An extension of their compassion was revealed in the fact that all the participants felt they were approachable and accessible with students and their peers. Ben felt comfortable sharing his home phone number with students and confided that the privilege had only been abused once in his 39 years at the college. He also felt that the fact that he interacted with adults probably also factored into his comfort level of sharing his personal life.

Two of the five participants felt that their beliefs were rooted from their strong childhood family values and that had helped build their characters into

adulthood. Ben confided that his mother had modeled for him the concept of “rooting for the underdog,” and he resolved to do the same in his adulthood. From a different view, one of the participants had confided the turmoil she experienced in her childhood, along with past and present dysfunctional communication in her family, yet her views reflected that she had forged and shaped positive values and characteristics.

Two of the five participants exhibited the characteristic of being willing to take risks for the student and as a result had experienced punitive personal costs in their careers’ as a result of advocating for students. It had cost one participant a promotion and the other participant’s contract was not renewed. Chris described her experience:

And the principal just was so quick to suspend him every time and things like that and I finally said ‘We’re not solving this problem. We are putting a Band-Aid on it and getting him out of the school for a day, you know so we can all just relax a little bit but it’s not fixing anything’....And boy, he [principal] didn’t like that.

Well, that’s what told me it wasn’t a good fit. I wasn’t going to sit back and just to hang on to my job and see things happen that I didn’t agree with and not say something.

Ben was very outspoken regarding the cost of his helping and working with the students on an intense basis.

You know so I intervened many times. And that had it's personal costs....

As a matter of fact, when I was up for promotion there was a conduit back to me that it cost me my promotion.

Commitment was evident, as both participants didn't even hesitate to adamantly express the belief that they would still extend the help to the student that was needed regardless of the end results.

Philosophies

All participants expressed their philosophies during the interviews. Some referred to them as visions, others called them beliefs, and yet others clearly classified them as translating into advocating for the student. All the participants were self-aware of their opinions or convictions, even if they didn't always have the words. Barb expressed a common view:

And one of the things I learned really early on in special education is 'you know what...we may not always know the answers, but if you do it from your heart...you learn from your experience and then you are able to maybe make better decisions when you are working with other students. So just go in there and try it and you may discover something else that somebody else doesn't know.

Chris felt that every child could learn given the appropriate environment and appropriate teacher. She also expressed, “It’s like you know how you feel about yourself as a teacher and know what good teaching is but it’s hard to put into words.”

On the other hand each had a strong sense of self-awareness and philosophies that they were able to voice. For instance Joe said, “If teachers felt okay about themselves it extends to the outside and the learning in the classroom.”

The term *advocacy* was defined by many as meaning that they put the students’ best interests first. As Barb stated:

When I hear advocating for a student I think of putting the student’s best interest first. And I think that in education we need to do that. I think our clients are our students and we need to do what is best for them. And we need to do what is best for all of them. So, and as a teacher you need to look at each individual student and as an administrator you need to look at each individual student.

Joe’s philosophy was that his role included “acting like a surrogate parent.” He elaborated by saying, “Most teachers today do a very good job as advocates, they care about the children and offer the children a future.” Ben went further by not only stating that the students needed to come first but strongly

stating a number of times during his interview that, “I mean, if it weren’t for the students we wouldn’t have jobs.”

Nancy was also very articulate in her belief that the student came before her job:

I think that like being an advocate is being you know that you are there for the student first and for your job second. And that you are going to stand up for the kid and if you see something they need and you know that they need it you are going to voice up for them and try get the resources they need to be successful.

One of the keys in all the interviews was that the participants felt that in order to provide the students with what they need to be successful they needed to approach the student as “a whole” and not just one aspect of the student. Ben echoed other participants’ views when he said, “It doesn’t make any difference how much you know, it is how approachable and accessible you are to students.” Barb also expressed that a comfort level needed to be provided to help provide for the student as a whole.

Ben expressed his view, “I believe that librarians for example *minister* if you will to the whole person, not just informational needs. So, I saw a chance to help people in general.”

Nancy philosophized regarding the students, “And to be not just successful in academics but as a person as a whole.”

One of the common denominators in all their philosophies was as Barb stated, “taking people where they are.” Ben was “cognizant of being very accessible, meeting them on a very personal level and then working from there on their strengths, not on their weaknesses.” He continued:

Students need a lot of help and I meet them where they are. Some are much needier than others. So if they don’t know, if they don’t have library skills or research skills I meet them on a very basic level. I will find answers instead of teach strategies at first because that is probably the way to their hearts to overcome intimidation. Then eventually they become more confident and repeat the experience in a good way rather than avoid it because it was a terrible first experience.

A philosophy that Nancy shared was that besides seeing the student’s strengths that educators needed to help empower the student to go beyond where they were at the present:

I tried so hard to make, you know, to make this kid understand that this group of people is gonna get you in trouble. You need to understand that you need to make choices that are going to affect you. You have two years left of high school. What are you going to do? You need to come to a point where you can function on your own, live independently, have respect for people so that they have respect for you.

Frustrations were also expressed during the interviews regarding various issues and Chris articulated her feelings of difficulty within the role of an advocate.

And being an advocate isn't always a fun job. There are things that you have to tell parents. Things you wish you didn't have to tell them. There are things you have to tell a teacher, you know we're doing about the best we can. If you know where to get a magic wand by all means tell me and I'll get one today. But you can't just fix things, I think that is a common misconception between some general ed and special ed teachers. Fortunately I have had both hats so I know what it is like on both sides.

All participants' philosophies, whether actually using the term advocate or not, encompassed being student-orientated and understanding and emphasizing the students' strengths, along with guiding the student toward independence.

Relationships

Data from the interviews indicated somewhat predictably that the participants who were strong advocates also were skilled in forming and fostering relationships. They understood that to provide a completed service for students that the team included parents, administration, teachers and the students

themselves. This contributed to stronger involvement for the students in terms of the students increasing their ability to become successful.

Early in Barb's career she realized, "But I really felt like I could make some change but the whole time I was doing that I was missing the relationship piece." She realized that relationships were important so she consistently targets that as one of her important goals in the school. She explained:

We're working really hard to bring parents into the school. We did that last year with the pizza grant. I think maybe pizza is a key because it was the middle of January. We also invited parents in to talk about the area of parent involvement and diversity...we had families here to have pizza and the parents had a presentation by Beverly where she encouraged them to interact, to get to know the other people at their table...Her message was really very clearly about parental involvement and how important that is in educating their students. She gave many examples of how parents can be involved in their student's education. Even for working families, which I think, is always a difficult thing for families to juggle that.

In regard to relationships, one participant, Chris, discussed the need to collaborate with the regular education teachers and the overall need for teamwork on an ongoing basis.

Which in some cases I do but you know I want to empower the teachers too to try, if it's a problem that is happening in the classroom it needs to be dealt with in the classroom. So that, in a round about way, is also being an advocate for the student. Because, you know, trying to keep them in that environment as much as possible, having that person, that teacher, deal with, as opposed to the kid always seeing that if I do this that the teacher has to go and get the special ed teacher...

Barb echoed the need for teamwork in building relationships when she described the interaction of teachers of different subject fields.

I think the relationship between the classroom teacher and special and specialist teacher regardless if it is specialist like a music or an art teacher or it's a special education teacher or some other way of providing support. I think the ultimate goal is they are all working together on a team for the students. And I see the parents very much a part of that.

Nancy's response to discussing relationships regarding her student was to point out that trust is an important factor in building a team and relationships "Trust, I mean and the open, like the open mindedness. I think that, you know, and being able to approach the person." She continued:

And just being that person that they can come to if they have issues and making them so that they trust you. So that they are able to talk to you about things that are going on that maybe they can't talk to anybody else about and just, you know....making it a safe environment, a non-resistant environment for them.

Relationships were also built through mentoring as described by Joe, who equated mentoring with being an advocate, showing interest in students' well being and development along with teaching them. He felt that his role included being involved with home by making phone calls, following up on parent conferences and calling the parent when there was a concern or need for communication regarding the child, whether it be good or bad.

Ben expressed positive feelings when he describe how he had forged lifelong friendships with his students by building relationships.

...there were personal costs but a lot more personal benefits. There was a lot of gratitude from students and I think we all need gratitude, whether we want to call it that or not. There were lifelong friendships. There was public recognition. In 1997 the senior class, I think it was, voted me the outstanding faculty member and I had to give a public address.

All participants agreed that strong relationships between all parties helped foster trust and communication, thus providing a strong basis for positive gains benefiting the student.

Problem-Solving

Four of the participants consistently described their openness to change along with the ability to reflect and improve their actions. They also could be described as innovative in their thinking and problem-solving. They often had the capabilities to “think outside the box.” According to Chris:

There are...you know...sometimes you have to change your methods.

The kids aren't going to conform to the methods that I've used in my six years of teaching. Just like they're not going to conform to the methods of the teachers teaching for 30 years. The methods have to change and it changes year to year.

Nancy admitted that when she first entered the field she didn't understand the unique and special needs of each student but she displayed another quality of the participants and that was being able to adapt quickly and become flexible. She explains:

I just did not get it, coming from a background where nobody I knew, nobody I knew, had disabilities that were known. Like outwardly known. And it was really hard for me at first. I couldn't understand, why do these kids get tests read to them. That's not fair. The other kids don't. Why should they get fifty- fifties? Why should they get extra time? Why should they get modified this and that? At first it was like it's not fair to the other kids. Cause they have to do all the work. They may be struggling too but they still have to do it. But the more I worked, I supported a special ed biology class, and the more I was in that class, the more I started to realized, that something just doesn't click. And these kids do need that small group setting. The one-on-one time and the patience to bring the things up to their cognitive level and it's just, it...I mean...you hear stories and you see these kids and you're just like, 'oh my gosh, they really don't get it!' And they really wouldn't really be able to function in a normal mainstream class without that extra help.

Respect was a key thread that the participants all utilized in their problem solving process with the students, along with the ability to see something in the students that no one else seemed to see. Nancy continues:

Its all a matter of perspective. I really think that we're so quick to judge these kids with emotional problems that they don't even get a chance.

Treating the student as a “whole” person continued into the problem-solving theme. The participants had the ability to bring the learning experience into the concept by exhibiting understanding regarding the student’s life. As Chris explains:

Like we said with behavior, everything is a learning experience. Whether it be a good one or a bad one. And so I think teaching is more than sitting down and this letter is “A” and it makes this sound. There is a lot more to it.

She continues, displaying compassion for their needs:

With so many kids being in a situation of poverty and you know the values changing and family structure changing there is a lot more need now for advocates. There is so much more now going on in school than just reading and writing and math.

Chris also added that “Whether it is teaching about math or anything...you know...you are always teaching....everything is a teachable moment.”

Ben elaborated on that concept when he stated, “We are an ongoing profession and they [students] have ongoing needs.”

The needs of the students were the basis that compelled the participants to “think outside the box.” The participants were tuned into the individual and unique needs of each student and they built their solutions based on those factors.

Perspectives Regarding Choosing not to be Involved

“I don’t think people get out of bed in the morning and think that I’m going to do a bad job.”

This was without a doubt the most difficult subject for all the participants. Whether the question was phrased by the researcher using the term *non-advocate* or the phrase *feel it was not their role* or the term *non involvement*, all but one participant paused the longest for their responses and often struggled, visibly painfully to reflect on the perspective of that view. On the other hand, one participant simply answered that “they didn’t care about children” in reference to the involvement of other teachers, but would not elaborate on that sentence.

Judging by the silence in response to the questions, the emotion raised in the voices, the pauses before words were formed, and some visible anger I felt this was the most sensitive portion of the interviews. Therefore, all the quotes posted are done anonymously for the utmost privacy of the participants. After some reflection one of the participants offered:

I’ve been in other places and I, you know I think it’s hard work, ...and I think sometimes it’s easier to blame other people and sometimes it’s easier not to be involved. I don’t know but certainly there are reasons that they

have for not advocating. I don't know if they would say that they weren't advocating. I think sometimes they [others] look at things differently.... I can think of instances where teachers have said to me 'I haven't thought of it that way.' 'or I haven't looked at it that way,' 'or you know ...' I think of that probably more...or they felt like what they were doing was the best thing for students at that time.

The participant continues:

I really don't think that people intentionally do something that would be harmful. I don't think people get out of bed in the morning and think that 'I'm going to do a bad job.' Especially people working with students and last any length of time.

Another participant brought up the sense of resignation of some peers who become frustrated with a system that works to the best of it's ability, but sometimes for some children is not enough.

I think in some situations, it's like... kids who may have been abused they tried to have changes made and tried to have changes made and nothing ever comes of it so they think why open their mouth and say anything?....I think some when it comes to situations where you need to intervene between a child and a parent, the teacher might see that it is a boundary

issue, it's none of my business, you know, the kind of thing I shouldn't get involved.

Three of the participants discussed the concern their peers may have with how administration may view some actions, along with the lack of tenure or risks to the peer's career. Two of the participants voiced the following:

Fear... I think they are scared that someone, somewhere might perceive that advocating for a student is trying to bump the system. Or trying to go against something or crossing the line that is implicitly drawn of where the teacher can advocate for a student. And a lot of newer teachers are going to have a harder time advocating because they are not tenured and not secure in their job.

The second participant offered:

And advocating for the wrong student might mean to administration taking that they are not going to comply with the system and how it works. And you're going to be a problem with the staff and with all the cuts, I think a lot of people are scared that they are going to lose their job.

When the topic of tenure was discussed one participant conveyed that even though the participant felt that he himself was a strong advocate for children,

there was still a tension of concern about not being tenured, so the participant was still cautious in his overall actions. The participant explained:

One time first year I was there I was on a committee and the discussion turned to something that I thought was not really appropriate and I pretty much told the other people that I needed to excuse myself because I did not have tenure. And they weren't offended at all. They said 'Absolutely, go ahead.' You know, because of it.

One participant tried twice to answer but stopped until the end of the interview when that participant added:

I think people as a rule are very guarded about their professions and they think that somehow serving students or being close to students, the whole student, makes them less of a professional. They think that distance factor between the student and the [teacher] or whatever is equivalent to professionalism.

There was a particularly strong perspective from one of the four participants who had chosen to elaborate.

Every teacher should be an advocate and if...I'll say this only because I know that there are some people in the field that are just in it for summers

off and they do a poor job. And they need to look for something else because that is not what our purpose is.

One participant did suggest a solution for the issue of vulnerability regarding non-tenure:

There have been situations where...we've needed to get things done. And I knew it was going to rock the boat a bit...so if it is a team effort I have asked somebody else that does have tenure to take the next step just because ...I do need in some sense to protect my job. You know, just for the sake of my family BUT...it's kind of a back door getting what you really need still...just in a roundabout way.

Regardless of the difficulty with the subject the participants did manage to convey some candid, astute and reflective comments regarding the actions of their peers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participants, whether instinctively, consciously, or subconsciously understood the six principles of Rudduck et al. (1996) creating a sturdy foundation for a strong environment and advocating for students. The data also suggests that educators who show the characteristics of passion, enthusiasm, empathy, compassion, commitment, along with being approachable and accessible have the ability to be prime candidates for advocating for students. Positive or negative childhoods of the participants was not a key factor in the participants' desires to advocate but *how* they chose to use the experiences of their childhood, whether positive or negative, to shape or mold who they became as adults became a key element.

The uniqueness of their philosophies in understanding that true advocacy entails taking the students where they are, being student-oriented, respecting the students, giving more weight to the students' strengths rather than weaknesses, and guiding the student toward independence helped nurture the development of the students.

The participants understood the value of building relationships based on trust between parents, students, educators and administration. They felt it necessary to minister to the whole student and key components to foster the students' success.

The participants exhibited innovative problem-solving skills and the ability to think outside the box in synthesis with advocating. They showed vision

in being able to see what others didn't and knew how to "be there" for the student, especially when the students weren't able to themselves.

Compassion and uniqueness to see "the other side" of issues surfaced in the discussion of perspectives regarding why their peers chose not to be involved. Though it appeared to be a foreign way of thinking for the interviewees they had the empathy to understand that frustration, fear, tenure, lack of security and looking at things differently all played roles in their peers' behaviors and responses.

The data also suggest that presently advocacy has the flaw of not coming without a price, as two of the participants incurred punitive costs to their careers when they were not in balance with administration in their views in advocating for the students.

The study raises questions for further exploration:

- ❖ How can the system help foster those characteristics that help educators become advocates?
- ❖ How can the stumbling blocks or fears regarding the administration be removed to foster a more supportive administration?
- ❖ How do we provide environments that encourage the creativity of problem solvers?
- ❖ What are the long-term results of students that have benefited from educators that are their advocates?

Clearly, school communities, as a whole would benefit from having strong advocates as leaders in the schools. Colleges training teachers have for a long time provided in their curriculum the concept of taking the child where they are and teaching to the “whole” student. Therefore, building strong collaboration teams between colleges that provide teacher training and schools where the teachers work could provide a sturdy foundation.

In school environments themselves, establishing teams consisting of teachers, administration, parents and students to study and help implement policies that help break the barriers of fear and lack of understanding regarding the boundaries of what is expected of the teacher would be a step.

Establishing internal teams that provide support and mentoring to teachers as they enter the field and on an ongoing basis would help the teachers not lose sight of what is important to the student.

Have in place teams that provide examples of leadership built on values of advocacy, compassion, empathy, commitment and Rudduck et al.’s (1996), six principles that would model to the whole community a living example of leadership.

Educators should examine these questions and suggestions especially since our student population of recent has emerged as diverse in culture and learning ability. It has become increasingly more important for a teacher to understand and be sensitive to a student’s background and current social economic status as it often pertains to learning capability and growth as a person and our future adults.

Reflection

Pre-research

Before I commenced this research project I wrote the following:

When I was young I really did think a lot in black and white. Real, or fake. Truth, or falsehood. As I've become older I've realized that everything in life is not black and white and there is an incredible amount of gray in the world. I also believe in balance. A balance of a person's rights and at the same time in having that right not causing harm to the greater mass.

I have a real hard time with the philosophy or the notion of the greatest good for the greatest number, if someone is hurt. So who decides the collateral damage? Is it OK if it's *someone else's* son or daughter or love one? Would it still be OK if it was one's own?

I do know that I believe that each person is valuable, regardless of their values or who or what they stand for in life.

So who am I and what do I believe ethically? I know that in my position the last couple of years that I was well respected for my actions. Not that I always had total agreement with the staff, but I am conscious each day that my actions should reflect my values. For if I *believe* it then my actions have to reflect that belief even when it is hard. I don't always make my mark, but I work at it.

Do I believe that I know the answers to any given situation? No. I spend an incredible amount of time doing a "reality check" so that I may input different

perspectives in my decision making. Does that make me indecisive? No, just reflective.

I also know that when I'm in a situation where my values are in contrast with the group's, that causes me imbalance and distress, that at the end of the day, in order to feel at peace I have to take action on what I believe.

So how does that apply to my thesis and ethical and professional views? Well, I suspect that I'm dealing with a delicate topic that could bring some surprises and if a person is comfortable speaking regarding the topic it may bring to the forefront some issues. When my thesis is complete I want a balance that I am comfortable with in my work and a sense that I accomplished something without causing harm to the participants in the process.

Post Project

At the conclusion of this project:

During the interviews I worked very hard at keeping my bias out of the conversation for this was an action research where the direction needed to be dictated by the participants and I was really only a tool to reflect and record their thoughts and words.

What was my bias? Well, I had strong beliefs that anyone in teaching should advocate, even if that meant challenging the system.

But true to form, life is not black and white and during the interviews I was given some very insightful perspectives regarding the flip view of why

everyone does not respond the same way in advocating. Some very compassionate thoughts came from the participants that encompassed people's own obligations stretching beyond themselves to concern for their family and also the understanding that not everyone has the same perspective of what defines an advocate.

Personally, I will take from this research a strong desire to work as a team and to understand others' perspectives and hopefully meet on the ground that would most benefit the students. For we have so much more to offer when it is given as a team effort. That was the balance that I was hoping to find for myself.

I will also take the knowledge that I was privileged to share some insights and wisdom from some very energetic, enthusiastic, committed and compassionate people whom I am fortunate enough to call colleagues and peers.

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